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The Rise and Fall of the Independent State of Croatia in the Memoirs and Testimonies of the Ustasha Members

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This article examines the defeat of the Ustasha movement and its impact on the way the members of the Croatian fascist movement represented themselves through memoirs and testimonies after the Second World War. The current historiography dealing with the Ustasha movement remains largely detached from the contemporary approaches derived from memory studies, which has resulted in existing research gaps related to questions of how, and why, the Ustashe remember their wartime activities. This paper is based on the analysis of 23 Ustasha memory sources; 11 testimonies and 12 memoirs. It examines differences between Ustasha testimonies given in Yugoslav detention, and memoirs which were written by the Ustashe who managed to emigrate to other countries. Significant discrepancy in the narratives and structure presented in the source material is attributed to the different circumstances in which they were written, the expected audience and the variegated experiences of defeat the Ustasha members went through.

KEYWORDS

Ustasha movement, memory, memoirs, testimonies, fascism, Independent State of Croatia, defeat, the Holocaust

For many members of the fascist Ustasha¹ movement, the period of the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH) from 1941 to 1945 was a defining point of their lives. The creation of the NDH uplifted the Ustashe from political margins in Yugoslavia, and those in emigration from exile, to the status of governing elites in a totalitarian state.² Most of them experienced astonishing upward social mobility and amassed power by quickly attained positions in the newly emerging state, party or military framework of the Ustasha regime. Many Ustashe also enjoyed substantial economic benefits as the result of the redistribution of wealth which was mainly the product of genocide and ethnic cleansing conducted against the Serbs, Jews and Roma.³ After the defeat of the Ustasha regime and the downfall of the NDH in 1945, the Ustashe were faced with grim prospects for their future – staying in Yugoslavia meant facing certain repression from the Yugoslav authorities, while the other option was going back to the status of political exiles which many of them had already experienced in the interwar period.⁴

Numerous Ustasha members provided their interpretations of the roots of the downfall of the NDH in testimonies, memoirs, articles and letters. Going beyond the military, economic and political perspective of the total defeat,⁵ this article analyzes Ustasha post-war narratives with a focus on various subjective experiences of the total defeat of the Ustashe. What factors influenced the reconstruction of their memory and how was it used as a space for the political reinvention of the self after the war?

¹ Ustasha (ustaša) is a singular form, while Ustashe (ustaše) is used as a plural in this paper.

² The Ustashe proclaimed their own ideology as totalitarian. See Danijel Crljen, *Načela Ustaškog Pokreta* [Principles of the Ustasha movement] (Zagreb, 1942), 113.

³ For standard, up-to-date, scholarly works on the genocide and mass violence in the Independent State of Croatia see Alexander Korb, "Understanding Ustaša Violence," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12 (2010): 1-18. Ivo Goldstein, Slavko Goldstein, *The Holocaust in Croatia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2016). Tomislav Dulić, *Utopias of Nation: Local Mass Killing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1941-42* (Uppsala: Studia Historica Upsaliensia, 2005).

⁴ There is an urgent need for further studies of pre-war numbers of Ustasha members and supporters both in Yugoslavia and in the emigration. According to current historiography the number of the Ustashe in the emigrant training camps in Italy and Hungary did not exceed 500 in the interwar period. Prominent Ustasha member, Slavko Kvaternik, claimed that at the height of their power in the pre-war period the Ustashe numbered about 900 members. For more information on the number of pre-war Ustashe, see Nada Kisić-Kolanović, ed. *Vojskovođa i politika: sjećanja Slavka Kvaternika* [Army leader and politics: Memoirs of Slavko Kvaternik] (Zagreb: Golden Marketing, 1997), 92. Historian Jozo Tomasevich also estimates the number at no more than 900 sworn Ustashe in Yugoslavia at the moment of the proclamation of NDH, adding 200 members from Italy. Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 337. Matković cautiously estimates the total number of about 2000 Ustashe at the time when they came to power. Hrvoje Matković, *Povijest Nezavisne Države Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Naklada Pavičić, 2002), 50. The Ustashe themselves estimated that the number of their sympathizers was somewhere between 30 - 40 000 at the moment when they took power. However, the Ustasha estimates are highly problematic, due to difficulties in determining who can be classified as a Ustasha sympathizer. Further difficulty is in determining the number of sympathizers because there were no opinion polls nor did the pro-Ustashe groups participate in the last elections before the war. See Alexander Korb, "Understanding Ustaša Violence," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12 (2010): 9.

⁵ Jenny Macleod, "Introduction," in *Defeat and Memory. Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, ed. Jenny Macleod (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

How did the Ustashe justify their actions, to whom and how did they try to present themselves, which episodes from their past did they emphasize, and which ones did they try to hide? These questions hold great importance for an understanding of the Ustasha history as well as for uncovering of psychological mechanisms which are used to cope with not only military, but also ideological and moral defeat.

In order to deepen the conceptual link between the total defeat and memory this article utilizes Paul Connerton's typology of memory and forgetting together with John Horne's typology of defeat.⁶ The process of distancing from the defeated (and discredited) movements, states and ideologies is analyzed by measuring individual's ideological evolution through larger periods of time and analyzing factors which contributed to their shifts in attitudes. However, the analysis of testimonies and memoirs has its limitations, as Aleida Assman, one of the pioneer scholars of memory studies, noted:

...survivors as witnesses do not, as a rule, add to our knowledge of factual history; their testimonies, in fact, have often proved inaccurate. This, however, does not invalidate them as a unique contribution to our knowledge of the past. Their point is less to tell us what happened than what it felt like to be in the center of those events; they provide very personal views from within.⁷

Although there are studies about the after-war life of the Ustasha members, such as Bogdan Krizman's⁸ research conducted in the 1980s, and more recently a PhD dissertation written by Ante Delić,⁹ they mostly center on the activities of Poglavnik¹⁰ – Ante Pavelić. These authors approach the topic primarily through the paradigm of political history by focusing on the elites. They are primarily interested in empirical and chronological reconstruction of events and contemporary approaches from memory studies and cultural history were not applied in them. The cultural approach, which is applied in this paper, focuses on the analysis of discourse and practices of historical actors and discerning how they gave meaning to their lives. In other words, the aim is not the factual reconstruction of events, but the analysis of "meaning-production in the past."¹¹

A successful application of the cultural approach in the analysis of the NDH was recently conducted by Rory Yeomans who wrote about the ways in which the victims of the Ustasha regime, mostly Serbs and Jews, wrote petitions and letters to the newly established authorities in order to

⁶ Paul Connerton, "Seven types of forgetting," *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 59-71. See also John Horne, "Defeat and Memory in Modern History," in *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, ed. Jenny Macleod (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 11-29.

⁷ Aleida Assman, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 263.

⁸ Bogdan Krizman, *Pavelić u bjekstvu* [Pavelić in Exile] (Zagreb: Globus, 1986).

⁹ Ante Delić, "Djelovanje Ante Pavelića 1945.-1953. godine" [Activities of Ante Pavelić 1945-1953] (PhD diss., Sveučilište u Zadru, 2016).

¹⁰ Poglavnik was the title used by Ante Pavelić and has the same meaning as Duce in Italian Fascism or Führer in German Nazism.

¹¹ Dan Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 246.

save their lives.¹² They tried to depict alternative identities to those ascribed to them by the Ustashe, and some reinvented their personal histories as a survival strategy. Much like some of the Ustasha members after the war, the persecuted minorities often “employed the state’s totalizing discourse to express a sense of belonging to the Croatian national community under construction.” Yeomans points out that persecuted ethnic groups in the NDH were “endeavoring to show that the writers had transformed themselves into members of the new society.”¹³ Yeomans opens new venues of research which should be further pursued when it comes to the victims of the Ustasha regime. However, no such study currently exists in relation to the memory of the Ustasha members captured by the Yugoslav authorities after the war. This case is especially intriguing because similar strategies of reinvention of the self were used by some of the captured Ustashe in order to demonstrate that they were ready to integrate into the new Yugoslav society.

This article builds on the analysis of 23 Ustasha memory sources, 11 of which are classified as testimonies and 12 are classified as memoirs. When it comes to Ustasha memory sources, there is a need to methodologically differentiate between testimonies and memoirs. For the purpose of this study testimonies are defined as written or oral accounts given in front of a body of authority – in this particular case, the security service of Yugoslavia which was dealing with the captured Ustashe. Testimonies of former Ustasha members were often given under interrogation which influenced their content and structure in significant ways. During the questioning, interrogators would ask a set of pre-determined, generic questions, but they would also often interrupt the narration of the Ustashe by asking for frequent clarifications which often broke the narrative and influenced the information given in the testimonies.

For the purpose of this study memoirs are considered to be personal written accounts of Ustasha members that were not written under any form of duress. The fact that memoirs were written with more reflection and distance in emigration, without the threat of force significantly influenced the content, argumentation and values represented in them. Due to the absence of interrogators, the narratives in the memoirs are far more consistent than those presented in the testimonies.

Both memoirs and testimonies of the Ustasha members were significantly shaped by the expectation of who was to be the prospective audience. Unlike testimonies, which were written primarily for the audience of Yugoslav authorities, Ustasha memoirs were written primarily for the audience of the Croatian émigré community, like-minded nationalists, or future Croatian generations.

The Ustasha Testimonies and the Total Defeat

As the Second World War in Europe was coming to a close, the Ustasha movement, together with the NDH, shared the fate of its Axis allies. The collapse of the Axis war effort, coupled with an increasingly powerful

¹² See Rory Yeomans, “In Search of Myself: Autobiography, Imposture, and Survival in Wartime Croatia,” *S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention, Methods, Documentation* 4 (2017): 21–39.

¹³ Yeomans, “In Search of Myself,” 22.

and popular Partisan movement on the territory of the NDH, brought the total defeat of the Ustasha. The bulk of the Ustasha forces attempted a retreat through Slovenia in order to surrender to the British forces situated in Austria. This was done in order to avoid being captured by the communist-led Yugoslav Partisans who had led an uncompromising struggle against the Croatian Ustashe, Serbian Chetniks and their Axis allies. An estimated 75 000 NDH soldiers, followed by about 45 000 civilians, tried to reach Austria, however, the majority was forced to turn around and ended up in Partisan hands.¹⁴ Many of the captured Ustashe and NDH soldiers, as well as civilians, were subjected to retributive political violence and mass executions by the Partisan units.

Immediately after the war, the Yugoslav regime, headed by Josip Broz Tito, launched a campaign of "repressive erasure" through which all remnants of the fascist Ustasha regime were exorcised.¹⁵ This was not only done on a symbolic level, but also involved a general ban of political rights and public service for the Ustashe and their collaborators, as well as episodes of mass murder. Only in 1947 there were more than 10 000 convictions by the Yugoslav courts for offenses "against the state and the people."¹⁶ Many of those convicted were the Ustashe who returned to Yugoslavia, or stayed in the country after the war, in order to organize terrorist cells with the aim of overthrowing the Yugoslav regime. According to estimates, there were up to 4 000 members of Croatian right-wing guerilla fighters in Yugoslavia in between 1945 and 1947.¹⁷ These pro-Ustasha and right-wing guerilla groups ultimately failed to mount serious resistance and mobilize mass support against Yugoslavia. Most of them were captured by the Yugoslav authorities and questioned about their activities and affiliation during the NDH period.

The Ustashe who were captured by the Yugoslav regime had to face the consequences of total defeat which is characterized by the "reconstruction of the vanquished according to the political values and economic systems of the victors."¹⁸ However, the Ustashe were not primarily defeated in an inter-state war, but in a civil war, which brought about additional difficulties for the vanquished. According to Horne, the defeat in civil war often requires total submission to the will and power of the victors. Those who are defeated in civil wars often face a choice: they either have to flee the country or they have to completely submit to the values, norms and expectations of the victors. The military and political defeat of the Ustasha regime and the downfall of the NDH also dealt a serious blow to the established myths of the Ustasha movement; for many of those who were

¹⁴ Martina Grahek Ravančić, *Bleiburg i križni put 1945. Historiografija, publicistika i memoarska literatura* [Bleiburg and the Death Marches: Historiography, journalism and memoirs] (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2009), 324-325.

¹⁵ For the concept of "Repressive Erasure" see Paul Connerton, "Seven types of forgetting," *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1(2008): 60.

¹⁶ Katarina Spehnbjak and Tihomir Cipek, "Disidenti, opozicija i otpor – Hrvatska i Jugoslavija 1945.- 1990." [Dissidents, opposition and resistance – Croatia and Yugoslavia 1945-1990], *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 39, no. 2 (2007): 264.

¹⁷ Zdenko Radelić, *Križari: Gerila u Hrvatskoj 1945-1950* [Crusaders: Guerilla in Croatia 1945-1959]. Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2002, 120.

¹⁸ Horne, "Defeat and Memory in Modern History," 14.

captured by the Yugoslav authorities, the Ustasha movement and its ideology were completely defeated and therefore delegitimized.

In order to distance themselves from the crimes of the Ustasha regime, and to alleviate their responsibilities, some Ustashe captured by the Yugoslav authorities started to rely on the argument that Pavelić was a manipulative despotic ruler who had tainted the purity of the Ustasha revolution. Vladimir Židovec, ambassador of the NDH to Bulgaria and an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,¹⁹ testified in front of the Yugoslav authorities that “for a long time the actions and personality traits of Ante Pavelić were a mystery to me. At first, I could not explain many of his steps. Only after we emigrated could I connect different threads and create a well rounded up picture.”²⁰ Židovec argues that the key to Pavelić’s power throughout the existence of the NDH was the fact that he ruled through the philosophy of “*divide et impera*.”²¹ According to Židovec many other high-ranking Ustashe also shared his opinion. Some of them told him that Pavelić was against any sort of hierarchical organization, and that he rejected establishing a typical institutional framework, supported by the rule of law.²² The wartime leader of the Ustasha Youth, Ivan Oršanić,²³ depicted Pavelić as a Byzantine type of ruler, who is guided by “Balkan arrogance, dishonesty, cunningness and contempt for people in whom he only sees his toys.”²⁴

The idea of the despotic ruler of the “eastern type” draws from a long tradition of Orientalization of the Balkans among the members of the Croatian far-right. Ever since the second half of the 19th century they argued that Croatia always belonged to the West, while the rest of the Balkans were under the prolonged influence of the Byzantine Empire, and subsequently the Ottoman Empire – this allegedly resulted in a development of a particular kind of mentality which was marked by immortality, corruption, violence, political manipulation, assassination, etc.²⁵ By projecting the despotic ruler of the “eastern type” onto Pavelić the Ustashe tried to pin all the responsibility for the war crimes and the defeat on to him and his inner circle.

Another argument used by the Ustasha members to explain the fall of the NDH was the stab in the back conspiracy theory. The argument exists in two distinct forms, one is closely connected to the despotic ruler argument and it can be reduced to internal or domestic treason, while the other form of the argument puts the international element in the form of Axis in the center

¹⁹ See Zdravko Dizdar, et al., *Tko je tko u NDH. Hrvatska: 1941-1945*. [Who is who in the Independent State of Croatia 1941-1945] (Zagreb: Minerva, 1997), 435.

²⁰ HR-HDA-1561, SDS (Služba Državne Sigurnosti – State Security Service), RSUP (Republički Sekretarijat za Unutrašnje Poslove), SRH (Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske), 013.0.56. (Vladimir Židovec), 118.

²¹ Ibid, 126.

²² HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.56 (Vladimir Židovec), 121.

²³ Ivan Oršanić (1904-1968) was a prominent Ustasha intellectual, during the NDH he was heading the Ustasha Youth. See Dizdar et al., *Tko je tko u NDH*, 302-303.

²⁴ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.56 (Vladimir Židovec), 122-123.

²⁵ Ante Starčević, *Iztočno pitanje*, (Zagreb: Tisak “Prve hrvatsk radničke tiskare, 1899). The reprint of the text can be found in Pavo Barišić, ed., *Ante Starčević: Izabrani Politički Spisi* [Ante Starčević: Selected Political Writings] (Zagreb: Golden Marketing, Narodne Novine, 1999), 235. For instances of Pavelić’s Orientalization of the Balkans see Ante Pavelić, *Doživljaji* [Experiences] (Zagreb: Despot Infinitus, 2015), 132-135.

of treasonous behavior. However, unlike the despotic ruler interpretation which does not fully consider the broader implications nor the larger group dynamic, internal treason argument is more inclusive in terms of variety of agents. For example, a member of the Ustasha elite who was captured after the war, Mile Budak,²⁶ claimed that

to all questions which were asked related to the persecution, mass slaughter, torture or any other kind of maltreatment [of minorities], and especially with destruction against the people and their property in Croatia I can say the following: there were a few people, who worked against the intentions of the government members and they were not subjected to any specific ministry. They did whatever they wanted on their own, and did not answer to anyone, besides, I suppose, to Poglavnik.²⁷

Reinvention of the Self

The policy of “brotherhood and unity” (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) was one of the cornerstones of Yugoslav regime’s ideology. “Prescriptive forgetting” is directly derived from it – the multiethnic community of Yugoslavia was encouraged to transcend past national conflicts and focus on positive images of the antifascist struggle (*Narodnooslobodilačka borba*, NOB) in which every ethnic group could find a positive image of integration into the new state and its dominant ideology.²⁸ Political prisoners and war criminals were also partially targeted by the policy of the “brotherhood and unity.” The Yugoslav press encouraged the Ustashe to admit their own guilt, repent in front of the Yugoslav authorities, and through it ensure the possibility of reintegration into the Yugoslav society. Yugoslav press wrote about “collaborators” who repented and were given lower sentences under the justification that they could contribute to the future of the community.²⁹ However, these invitations for the admission of guilt in exchange for reintegration into the society were highly selective at best. Higher ranking Ustasha officials such as prominent ideologues, leaders of military or party institutions or those known for their participation in mass atrocities were aware that they would never be given a chance to integrate in the new Yugoslav society. Prisoners such as Mile Budak were fully aware that they would be executed because of their profile.³⁰

The Ustasha prisoners of middle rank hoped that their limited exposure in the Ustasha media, lack of direct involvement in the mass atrocities or front-line combat service would provide them with a chance to evade death sentences. They tried to reinvent their political biographies in order to convince the Yugoslav authorities that they never believed in the Ustasha ideology, that they covertly opposed it, or that they abandoned it

²⁶ Mile Budak (1889-1945) was a prominent pre-war writer and politician, Ustasha ideologue, and a minister holding multiple offices in the Independent State of Croatia. For more on Budak see Dizdar, *Tko je tko u NDH*, 53-55.

²⁷ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.52. (Mile Budak), 22.

²⁸ For the concept of “Prescriptive Forgetting” see Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” 61.

²⁹ Ana Jura, “Komunistička represija u Hrvatskoj prema pisanju Vjesnik, svibanj – kolovoz 1945. godine” [Communist repression in Croatia according to the writings of *Vjesnik*, May – August 1945], *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 44, no. 1 (2012): 66.

³⁰ Nada Kisić-Kolanović, “Vrijeme političke represije: ‘veliki sudski procesi’ u Hrvatskoj 1945.-1948.” [Time of political repression: ‘Great Court Proceedings’ in Croatia 1945-1948], *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 25, no. 1 (1993): 10.

immediately after the war. They intentionally rearranged their biographies in accordance to the expectations of the new Yugoslav regime in order to fit the new ideological paradigm.

For example, Vladimir Košak,³¹ the Minister of Finance of the NDH government, argued that he was “convinced to this day, that from an economic standpoint I provided all the possible resistance to the Germans and Italians, if there were any concessions given to them, they were insignificant and they were given only to refute their higher and bigger requests.”³² Košak also tried to adjust his wartime record to the projected expectations of the communists by arguing that he always believed that the economy should be nationalized and that it should be in the “people’s hands.” Furthermore, he claimed that he was always against big capital, hoping he could demonstrate compatibility with communist anti-capitalism.³³ Košak therefore adopted the political language of the communist regime, and attempted to show the compatibility of his war-time activities with the communist ideology. He also tried to whitewash his anti-communist and antisemitic attitudes by emphasizing the supposed help he had given to pro-communists and Jews during his service in the NDH.³⁴ Košak tried to make his final attempt at repenting in the following passage:

I am aware of my guilt, because by helping the NDH, as a mere occupational instrument, I directly benefited the occupiers, and I deeply regret it. I got into a horrifying company and into a horrible thing [in general], which was an instrument of regression, so I do not have any words with which I could express my regret and shame [for my actions]. At that time [of the NDH], I was not aware of my actions, because I was fooled, that I am actually working for the interest of the people, while in reality I was working against them, and I would be the happiest and most thankful person, if I would be given a chance, to wash this shame with my future work or at least partially wash it [off of me].³⁵

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However, Košak’s plea to be given a chance to reintegrate into the Yugoslav society failed. He was tried for treason and war crimes and executed on June 18, 1947.³⁶ Similar attempts to reinvent his own biography and prove that he was not antisemitic were also used by Ivan Perčević,³⁷ an important member of the pre-war Ustasha movement, and an Ustasha official during the NDH. Perčević tried to prove that he had many cousins who were Jewish, and that his landlord was also a Jew. He boasted that he had helped his landlord to relocate to Italy.³⁸ Perčević also tried to show himself in a democratic light by arguing that “for a very long time prior to the [Second World] war I sympathized with England and the USA, but the circumstances were such that I had to be on the side of the Nazis.”³⁹ Perčević shared the fate of Košak, he too was executed in 1947.

³¹ For more on Vladimir Košak see Dizdar, *Tko je tko u NDH*, 199.

³² HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.49 (Vladimir Košak), 63.

³³ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.49 (Vladimir Košak), 185.

³⁴ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.49 (Vladimir Košak), 157.

³⁵ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.49 (Vladimir Košak), 150.

³⁶ Dizdar, *Tko je tko u NDH*, 199.

³⁷ For more on Ivan Perčević (1881-1947) see, Dizdar, *Tko je tko u NDH*, 315-316.

³⁸ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.53 (Ivan Perčević), 55.

³⁹ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.53 (Ivan Perčević), 83.

In order to prove his ability to integrate into the new Yugoslav society Vladimir Židovec went as far to state that

if a man stands of the materialistic philosophical position, then he must foresee the victory of communism over the rotten capitalist society. That is because communist materialism is more concerned with the social issues which have to be solved, and it is also grounded in science, and therefore superior to capitalist materialism. If one stands on a religious position, then [...] the victories of communism were created by God's will.⁴⁰

He added that

whenever someone in emigration mentioned plans about any sort of Kingdom of Yugoslavia or about the sub-Danubian bloc of catholic countries, meaning the restoration of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, I would always answer, that a far better solution for the Croatian people was the contemporary Yugoslavia with communist leadership.⁴¹

Vladimir Židovec was executed on March 3, 1948.⁴²

Memoirs

Although the Yugoslav regime was effective in eliminating the Ustasha ideology and its symbolism from the country, many former Ustasha members managed to escape and emigrate. Mate Nikola Tokić noted that about 12 000 collaborators or anti-communist-oriented Croats found political asylum in Germany after the war. Additionally, about 20 000-40 000 managed to escape through the so-called ratlines to countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, Spain, United States, Canada and Australia.⁴³ At least 7 250 Croat émigrés reached Argentina between 1947 and 1949, most of whom held positions within the NDH.⁴⁴ Yugoslav government estimated that between 10 000 and 12 000 members of anti-communist opposition from the entire territory of Yugoslavia reached Argentina by 1949. At least 600 of them were classified as war criminals who were wanted for trial by Yugoslavia.⁴⁵ However, those wanted for war crimes in Argentina formed only a tiny minority compared to the total of 7 812 war criminals which were wanted by the authorities of Yugoslavia at the time.⁴⁶

Among those Ustashe who arrived to Argentina was Ante Pavelić, who performed the role of the charismatic leader of the Ustasha movement and the NDH. After his arrival Pavelić continued with his political activities trying to further his influence in the emigrant organizations. In 1950 he founded the Hrvatska državotvorna stranka [Croatian State-Building Party]. Which was seen as an attempt to refashion the Ustasha ideology and to show its "democratic turn." However, some emigrants criticized these

⁴⁰ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.56 (Vladimir Židovec), 175.

⁴¹ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.56 (Vladimir Židovec), 176.

⁴² Dizdar, *Tko je tko u NDH*, 435.

⁴³ Mate Nikola Tokić, "Landscapes of conflict: unity and disunity in post-second World War Croatian émigré separatism," *European Review of History: Revue europeenne d'histoire* 16, no. 5 (2009): 740-741.

⁴⁴ Pino Adriano, Giorgio Cingolani, *Nationalism and Terror: Ante Pavelić and Ustasha Terrorism from Fascism to the Cold War* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2018), 373.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 387.

⁴⁶ Kisić-Kolanović, "Vrijeme političke represije," 3.

attempts as a façade which was merely hiding Pavelić's dictatorial zeal. This was also corroborated by the Yugoslav secret service which reported that by 1952, Pavelić had performed dictatorial powers over the post-war emigrant community in Argentina. One of the main instruments in defending the Ustasha regime and Ante Pavelić was the newspaper *Hrvatska* [Croatia] which started to be issued in 1947 in Buenos Aires.⁴⁷

However, the post-war Croatian émigré community was not monolithic, it was ridden with conflicts and tensions between various groups. For example, Ivan Oršanić a prominent Ustasha member who headed the Ustasha Youth in the NDH, founded the *Hrvatska republikanska stranka* [Croatian Republican Party] in 1951 in Argentina. The party increasingly propagated democratic values, which consequently meant rivaling Pavelić.⁴⁸ Vinko Nikolić, another prominent Ustasha member, edited the journal *Hrvatska Revija* [Croatian Review] from 1951. Nikolić allowed the publication of numerous articles which were highly critical of the Ustasha regime and Ante Pavelić.⁴⁹ Therefore, these early splinter groups within the Ustasha emigrant community provided first platforms to criticize Pavelić and aspects of the Ustasha regime publicly – encouraging debate and critical reflection of wartime policies.

One of the most outspoken critics of Ante Pavelić in the émigré community was Eugen Dido Kvaternik, the notorious head of the Ustasha security apparatus between 1941 and 1942, who managed to escape to Argentina after the war.⁵⁰ For Eugen Dido Kvaternik, there was no doubt that Pavelić, together with his close circle of associates, carried the greatest responsibility for the downfall of the NDH. He noted:

Being traitors to the basic Croatian interests, sabotaging the organization and arming of the military, corruption, orgies and banditry, despicable treachery, careerism, power and wealth – doing all this with most horrible crimes – ruined the golden opportunity of the 10th of April 1941. Croatia did not fall because of the Serbian question. It fell, because the Croatian nation tolerated a typically orientalist regime, which committed a horrible treason, and to hide this treason, they turned the Ustasha revolution into chaos and anarchy.⁵¹

By employing the commonly used accusation of “despotic ruler,” which was also used by the Ustashe imprisoned by the Yugoslav regime, Eugen Dido Kvaternik tried to downplay the role of the uprising against the NDH which was largely a response to his ruthless implementation of mass violence. As the head of the entire security apparatus of the NDH Dido Kvaternik pursued a policy of national homogenization through ethnic cleansing and genocide. He coordinated the persecution of Serbs, Jews and

⁴⁷ Deliĉ, “Djelovanje Ante Pavelića 1945.-1953. godine,” 163, 167.

⁴⁸ Mario Jareb, “Hrvatska politička emigracija 1928.-1990” [Croatian political emigration 1928-1990], in *Hrvatska politika u XX. stoljeću* [Croatian politics in the twentieth century], ed. Ljubomir Antić (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, 2006), 319.

⁴⁹ Aleksandra Bednjanec Vuković, “Prilozi o NDH u časopisu ‘Hrvatska revija’ od 1951. Do 1971. godine” *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, vol. 32, (2000), 95.

⁵⁰ Dizdar, *Tko je tko u NDH*, 223-225.

⁵¹ Jere Jareb, *Eugen Dido Kvaternik. Sjećanja i zapažanja 1925-1945, Prilozi za hrvatsku povijest* [Recollections and observations from 1925 to 1945: a contribution to Croatian History], (Zagreb: Starčević, 1995.), 287.

Roma during the critical period from 1941 to 42 when the genocide against these minorities reached its height.⁵²

The accusations of who precisely betrayed the national struggle eventually turned into an open "blame game" among Ustasha members. Accusations against each other were published in memoirs, emigrant newspapers and in exchanges of personal letters. An extraordinary example was the exchange between Ivo Rojnica, a highly ranked Ustasha official who governed the area around Dubrovnik during the NDH, and Danijel Crljen,⁵³ who was one of the main ideologues of the Ustasha movement, and a staunch defender of Pavelić and the Ustasha regime after the war. In 1969 Rojnica wrote his memoirs in which he was highly critical of the Ustasha leadership.⁵⁴ Danijel Crljen wrote a response to Rojnica in a form of a booklet in which he accused Rojnica of tarnishing the reputation of Poglavnik and the NDH and serving the interests of Yugoslav propaganda.⁵⁵ However, the real contention between Rojnica and Crljen was the issue of responsibility for the Holocaust in the NDH.⁵⁶ Irritated by Rojnica's criticism, Crljen published an authentic proclamation signed by Rojnica from which it was obvious that Rojnica participated in the persecution of the Jews in the NDH. Rojnica responded that "if he [Crljen] had any honor, pride, intelligence and honesty he would not touch this sensitive question from the war. Let us not forget that we were allies with Germany and a member of the Axis, with all its consequences."⁵⁷ However, Rojnica did not follow his own advice and further amped up the "blame game" by responding: "I can accuse professor C[rljen], that it was him, as a member of the propaganda, who promoted anti-Jewish incidents. When he wrote about the Jewish question in 1943[...], he pointed out that the [Jewish] question was 'resolved with thorough persistency'."⁵⁸ The exchange between Crljen and Rojnica demonstrates how powerful the mechanisms of the "blame game" truly were – everything was done in order to preserve the positive image of oneself. The result of the exchange is that both individuals publicly discussed the topic which was the subject of silencing, and a taboo which was not supposed to be debated outside of the closed Ustasha ranks.

Even Pavelić himself entered into the "blame game" politics, by arguing that the Ustasha regime was not collaborationist. Pavelić projected the blame for collaborationism on National-Socialists within Croatia who founded a "party and made up supposed 'gothic theories'."⁵⁹ When faced with serious accusations from fellow Ustasha members who criticized him, Pavelić's magazine *Hrvatska* [Croatia] proclaimed that it "does not enter into

⁵² HR-HDA-1561, SDS, 013.0.56. (Židovec), 139-140; HR-HDA-1561, SDS, 013.0.55. (Svježić), 64.

⁵³ For more on Danijel Crljen see Dizdar, *Tko je tko u NDH*, 72.

⁵⁴ See Ivo Rojnica, *Susreti i doživljaji* [Meetings and experiences] (Zagreb: DoNeHa, 1994).

⁵⁵ Danijel Crljen, *Svjedočanstvo* [Testimony] (Buenos Aires, 1984), 3; 6; 46.

⁵⁶ I will treat the topic of the Holocaust in the memoirs and testimonies of the Ustasha in greater detail in a separate article which I intend to publish under the title "The Other Side of Holocaust Memory: Antisemitism and the Holocaust in Testimonies and Memoirs of the Ustasha Members."

⁵⁷ Ivo Rojnica, *Krivotvorenje istine* [The Falsification of the Truth] (München and Barcelona: Reprinted from "Hrvatska Revija," 1984), 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Delić, "Djelovanje Ante Pavelića 1945.-1953. godine," 187.

any discussions, either based on individual or party-political nature” arguing that this would only provide enemies with more ammunition for attacks on the Ustashe.⁶⁰

Some Pavelić’s supporters in emigration employed the explanation of foreign stab in the back conspiracy in order to shield the regime and Pavelić himself from any responsibility. Danijel Crljen, argued:

...there were multiple intrigues of the Fascist Italy against the NDH and it was done continuously. While the Italian Fascists armed Chetniks, and together with them conducted raids against the innocent Croatian population, at the same time they were calling for the occupation of the second zone based on these same raids. Not having any other option but to comply, Poglavnik accepted the temporary occupation.⁶¹

Crljen argued that the alliance with Italy and Germany was necessary for the establishment of the NDH and concluded that Croatia could not make peace arrangements with the allies because of the German military power. He argued that if Croatia attempted to make peace with the Allies then Germany would crush Croatia militarily with a full-blown invasion. Crljen used Warsaw as an example of what would have happened to Croatia if they had changed sides.⁶² Prominent Ustasha ministers, who were interned by the British forces in camps in Italy immediately after the war, also employed similar explanations in order to justify Pavelić’s and their own flight from Croatia:

Germans betrayed A. Pavelić, because they talked him into fleeing [Croatia], by arguing that later on we will fight against Russia and communism together with the English and the Americans, and yet they [Germans] capitulated.⁶³

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The Ustasha memoirs written in emigration show radically different narratives as opposed to the ones given in testimonies. Unlike those who were captured by the Yugoslav services, the Ustasha members who managed to emigrate after the war did not have to abandon their political convictions but to reform and readjust them. Ustashe belonging to the so-called second emigration, created multiple political organizations which started to replace discredited traits of the Ustasha ideology and realigned their ideological core to the new Cold War realities. For example, Croatian National Committee (Hrvatski narodni odbor, HNO) which was led by a prominent Ustasha member Branimir Jelić, was founded in Munich in 1950. The program of the organization stated that

the HNO sets as its primary goal the liberation of Croatia and the re-erection of a sovereign Croatian state within its complete ethnic and historical territory... [In doing so, the HNO] rejects every form of Totalitarianism, including that from the left as well as the right.⁶⁴

Therefore the emigrant Ustashe did not only try to reinvent themselves through their memoirs, but the Ustasha ideology as such. In the context of the Cold War, the emigrant Ustashe tried to realign their ideology to fit the newly created Western bloc in which they saw the only chance of resurrecting

⁶⁰ Ibid, 188.

⁶¹ Crljen, *Svjedočanstvo*, 12.

⁶² Danijel Crljen, *Svjedočanstvo II* [Testimony II]. (Toronto: Naklada NDH Publishing, 1988), 12.

⁶³ HR-HDA-1561, SDS, RSUP SRH, 013.0.56 (Vladimir Židovec), 120.

⁶⁴ As quoted in Tokić, “Landscapes of conflict,” 741.

the NDH. Therefore, the emigrant Ustashe tried to cleanse their ideology of discredited political concepts such as totalitarianism and antisemitism. Many tried to depict themselves, and their program as democratic in order to fit the US-led anti-communist bloc. Therefore, the Ustashe tried to de-fascisticize the movement's ideology. However, they kept their ideological core⁶⁵ which consisted of (1) uncompromising insistence on the independence of Croatia, (2) organic nationalism,⁶⁶ and the belief that these two aims should be accomplished through (3) usage of political violence. Due to the fact that this ideological core of the movement remained consistent throughout the existence of the Ustasha movement, regardless of the most recent reinvention of the ideology, Tias Mortigijja suggested that after-war activities of the movement should be termed "Neo-Ustashaism" (neoustaštvo).⁶⁷ These attempts at reconfiguring the Ustasha ideology by the émigré community were a common occurrence among various extreme nationalist and fascist movements in the post-war period. Gregorz Rossolinski Liebe, for example, mentions that much like the Ustashe, members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, Romanian Iron Guard and Slovakian Hlinka Guard all used similar strategies of depicting themselves as victims of Nazism. Moreover, together they formed the "Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations, which united veterans of several East European fascist movements."⁶⁸

Even though the Ustasha émigrés suffered the same defeat as those captured by the Yugoslav authorities, they went through a radically different subjective experience of it. Unlike those captured by the Yugoslav authorities the emigrant Ustashe, by and large, were not threatened with discrimination, political oppression or imprisonment. Unlike the Ustashe who were imprisoned and atomized, emigrants created mutual support networks through which they could reaffirm their political attitudes. Pavelić's supporters rejected the defeat and as a consequence resurrected the "culture of wartime."⁶⁹ They perceived the diaspora life as a temporary residence until the new front in the Balkans opens up, for them the war did not end in 1945. Unlike the Ustasha critics of Pavelić in Yugoslav captivity, the "blame game" among the Ustasha emigration had a completely different function. The emigrants' criticism of Pavelić was not a means to save their lives, but a tool used for political power struggle, and for the preservation of the reputation of the Croatian nationalist movement.

However, both in the memoirs and the testimonies it is evident that the Ustasha members entered a process of exorcising what was perceived

⁶⁵ For the concept of ideological core and periphery see Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶⁶ For the concept of organic nationalism see Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64.

⁶⁷ Trpimir Macan, ed., *Tias Mortigijja: Moj životopis* [Tias Mortigijja: My biography] (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1996), 96.

⁶⁸ Gregorz Rossolinski Liebe, "Inter-Fascist Conflicts in East Central Europe: The Nazis, the 'Austrofascists', the Iron Guard, and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists," in *Fascism Without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918-1945.*, eds. Arnd Bauerkamper and Gregorz Rossolinski Liebe (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 187.

⁶⁹ Horne, "Defeat and Memory in Modern History," 24.

as Satanic in the movement and tried to realign to the new geopolitical realities of the Cold War. The dominant prism of self-representation was to show themselves as victims of conspiracy, historical circumstances or manipulation. The self-victimization took form in three dominant arguments: (1) despotic ruler argument, (2) domestic stab in the back and, (3) foreign stab in the back argument. This self-victimization was a necessary precondition for the reinvention of the self in order to present themselves as innocent.

Conclusion

The case of the Ustasha movement demonstrates that identification of a type of defeat, in this case the total defeat, has led to attempts of major reinvention of its past members. However, in order to understand the wide array of memories among the Ustashe, it is not the defeat itself, which is the defining factor, but the subjective experience of it. Although many Ustashe went through similar realities of total defeat, the way they had to cope with its consequences after the war differed radically between individuals and depended on a variety of factors. The Ustashe strategy for the reinvention of the self can be split into two overarching categories: (1) those who were captured by the Yugoslav services, and (2) those who managed to emigrate after the war. Among members who were imprisoned in Yugoslavia, there are subcategories which include (1a) those who tried to reinvent their past in order to save their lives and to readjust their narratives in order to potentially integrate into the newly formed socialist state. This group mostly included mid-ranking Ustasha officials and those who tried to depict themselves as technocrats. The second subgroup (1b) consisted of high ranking and prominent Ustasha members who presumably understood that the weight of evidence against them, or their mere reputation, would prevent them from ever being given a chance to reintegrate into the new society. This subgroup predominantly tried to demonstrate the purity of their actions and present an image of themselves as honorable men. Virtually all captured Ustasha members, analyzed in this paper, tried to defend their own individual integrity, and all of them criticized the Ustasha regime either in part or in its entirety. They did not attempt to defend the Ustashe collectively, nor did they show any serious attempts at defending the Ustasha ideology or to reform it in the captivity.

The Ustasha members who managed to emigrate after the war could also be classified into two subcategories: (2a) members who were apologists of the regime and Ante Pavelić; and opposing them were the (2b) members who blamed Pavelić and his close circle for all the misdeeds of the NDH. This classification explains the division between those who criticized the regime (6/12 memoirs) and Pavelić (5/12 memoirs). Apologists of Pavelić attributed full responsibility for war crimes, as well as the movement's defeat, on either irresponsible individuals or the Axis powers. Pavelić's opponents (2b) were mostly adherents of the despotic ruler argument according to which Pavelić and his close circle of associates had tainted the image of the Ustasha movement and Croatian nationalism. Nevertheless, members of both subgroups actively pursued a narrative which allowed for the reinvention of themselves, of the Ustasha movement, and of its history, in order to

preserve its legacy. However, critics of Pavelić in emigration (2b) thought that reorganization and acceptance of "neo-Ustashism" could only function if they got rid of Pavelić who was seen as being too compromised to head the movement in the new geopolitical context of the Cold War. If Pavelić's opponents wanted to rid themselves of the stigma of totalitarianism, they had to criticize its single most visible symbol, the leader of the movement itself. They tried to demonstrate that the totalitarian nature of Pavelić's rule absolved them of any criminal guilt, ultimately depicting themselves as new victims at the hands of Poglavnik.

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